

The distressing neglect of the non-plantation territory

The other day, an interesting video footage was shown on TV of a scene of two elephants fighting on the Buttala-Kataragama road causing a huge traffic snarl. The road itself appeared to be well laid, wide and asphalted; this is stated here to impress on the readers the great revolution that has taken place and is continuing to do so, by leaps and bounds in the island's transport and travel systems in the last few decades. Having lived and worked there, a little more than fifty years ago, this writer is quite conversant with the travel and transport conditions that prevailed there at the time. What is called the Buttala-Kataragama road today was no road at all. It was, at best, a mere 'bridle-path' through thick jungle on the terrain that formed a part of the Yala Game Sanctuary and with no human settlement anywhere on its entire 26-mile stretch. The conditions prevailing were totally different to what were shown on TV. Indeed, if at all, any human presence on that only jungle track, at the time, was only during the two weeks of the Kataragama pilgrim season. Thereafter, it was totally abandoned to the jungle and left derelict, until the next season. Though, today, motor vehicles are seen swarming that road then it was the elephants that swarmed the place! The change that seems to have taken place is truly unbelievable; and let us remember this metamorphosis that has taken place is general, islandwide and not confined to one area.

Kings and roads

Today, words such as, "expressways", "carpet surfaces", "flyover bridges", "pedestrian crossings", "traffic jams" etc., etc., are repeatedly heard in our transport and travel parlance. Let us realise that such words and phrases are of recent coinage and convey the tremendous pressures of traffic generated and are growing alarmingly on our roads. The speed-masters guzzling fuel and devouring miles are daily inundating our roads and have virtually chased out the harassed pedestrians for whom these roads were once built, to the fences and the drains, leaving them reeling and choking in the smoke and gasping for breath. In terms of the human lives lost on our roads daily in motor accidents, it is clear that our roads are no longer safe for travel, more so, on foot. Gone to never to return are the days when travellers walked on foot-paths and tracks under shady trees with their burdens on their heads and shoulders, engaged in pleasant conversation listening to the birds or enjoying the breezes today, such scenes sound romantic and, of course, belong to a lost world. If there are any footpaths and bridle-tracks remaining still, they are doomed to extinction soon. The fact is that men are in a hurry and can't wait and maybe we will soon forget how to walk. With this emerging scenes on our roads, we must realise a great revolution has taken place in the nature and modes of our living as well as the rural scene and the villages are fast disappearing.

Any student of Sri Lankan history would know that our kings and other rulers of the past apparently did not consider roads, as we know them today, one of the priorities in their administration set-up or for the better control of their kingdoms. For the most part, it appears, the peripheral administrators were left to themselves in the wielding of their powers with the king at the centre interfering only in events and crises of any national importance. At best his

authority over them was minimal and nominal. The reason for this was the non-availability of roads. Under such a set-up the remote regions, rural settlements and villages were scattered and cut off from one another by thick forests or at best tenuously connected by hardly discernible foot-paths and jungle tracks. The island's early history mentions of only one important road the well-known road from Magama (near today's Tissamaharama) along the right bank of the Mahaweli Ganga crossing the river at several fords and reaching Anuradhapura via Vijithapura (near Polonnaruwa) and branches running out from there to the Ports—Mantota (today's Mannar), Gonagamtota (today's Trincomalee) and Dambakolapatuna (today's Nagadipa). Indeed, the kings of the later periods, particularly, during the Kandyan times, deliberately neglected or even discouraged roads because the mountainous terrain, the rivers the jungles were their first line of defence at war time.

Kandy

After the British captured Kandy in 1815, they found the absence of roads irksome for the movements of their armies and, generally, for administrative purposes, so much so that one Governor Henry Ward said that what Ceylon at the time needed was first roads, second roads and third roads. They went ahead opening trunk roads required for their most urgent purposes beginning with the heavily wooded and mountainous terrain of the Kandyan area. However, whatever the government contribution was in this task, the real boost for road construction particularly, in the newly acquired Kandyan territory, came from the early planting companies of England, whose agents came and opened first coffee and later tea plantations. They opened roads in some of the most difficult terrain, for some of their best and extensive plantations were there. They bridged rivers, tunneled the mountains and cut through perilous cliff-faces like Kadugannawa and Demodara—these are no small engineering feats even by today's standards—and this at a time when engineering, technological skills available locally were minimal or non-existent. To their eternal credit, it has to be stated however that what they built, they built to last, though they were built not for any love of the natives though we are still using. And, let it be stated clearly, here and now, that the motives and policies of British road building make a shameless saga of absolutely selfish administrative strategy to serve themselves certainly not meant as welfare measures for the benefit and wellbeing of the natives, for even up to the time they had to leave, the non-plantation areas of the country, the remote rural native areas of the outback, where the poorest and most neglected of the population lived did not have even a semblance of built roads and were covered and truly buried in impenetrable jungle.

Their policy and the laws governing it regarding the forests every inch of which they declared belonged to the state, were absolutely draconian and the natives were strictly prohibited from entering them or even cutting a stick from them. Any poor villager trespassing had an ICR (Illicit Clearing Report) made against him to the GA by the Village Headman, and he was prosecuted and punished. As a result at the time they left, most villages in these areas were heavily crowded with no permission to expand though the forest stretched for miles right from his doorstep. No wonder one of acts of legislation that Prime Minister D. S. Senanayake had to make when Independence was gained was to have the forests released for village expansion.

Raling acumen

It would be interesting for the uninitiated reader to know how the colonial masters managed to administer such remote forest bound, unroaded areas without any form of vehicular transport as well. Indeed, how they set in motion a most efficient governing mechanism in those areas under such conditions forms an equally unbelievable story of their resourcefulness and astute ruling acumen— without roads, without today's communication facilities except for a very primitive postal system, whose services seldom reached these remote trackless regions and, without today's media network. It speaks a lot for their skills as rulers and empire builders, more so when the rulers and the subject races spoke and worked in different languages!

It is clear that the resourceful British masters were equal to their task: they had developed a relatively efficient, cast-iron administrative system with a Government Agent (Agent of the King in England through the Governor in Colombo) of the District, wielding his authority through his Chief Headmen down to the Village Headmen at the grassroots. True, the more distant regions of his little 'empire' were without roads or even, foot-path and were isolated by thick jungle, but once a year he would set out on a cross-country tour of two weeks, accompanied by his Kachcheri staff and Chief Headmen, meeting the villagers and local headmen; he would attend to their problems, hear minor complaints, settle disputes, punish the miscreants, make minor appointments, make a general inspection of seniority conditions etc. before getting back to the Kachcheri. While he is on circuit he may spend a night in what was called by the time, Gamsabawa a straw-thatched half-walled, open hall with just one small room with a bed at one end of it. He brings his cook and the provisions and his food is prepared in a little hut behind; the arduous travelling he does mostly on foot and where possible on horse-back with the village headman providing labour to carry the bags and baggage. To cross the rivers suspension bridges were provided.

This article hopes to give today's readers some idea of how in the early decades of the last century till even as late as the 1960s villagers in such rural settlements often with a mere sprinkling of population, lived their simple uncluttered lives, totally cut off, not only from urban influences but also from other villages without roads and surrounded by thick jungles. The folk of these villages eked out their existence by agricultural pursuits of paddy and chena cultivation in alternate seasons guided by rain-patterns. With their simple and modest needs they were almost entirely self-sufficient in food and, for whatever other needs, they went to the weekly fair, maybe ten miles away, carrying some of their farm produce sold to find the money and in the absence of any vehicular conveyance, they were compelled to carry their goods on their shoulders. What they usually purchased with their severely limited finances would be commodities like clothes, dry-fish, salt, kerosene etc., etc. All travelling of course was on foot. One more interesting feature of these villages was that jungle being all around and wild beasts in plenty, they took to hunting in a big way. By the very nature of their lives they had to do some hunting for the protection of their cultivations. Few of them possessed guns and those who had them were much in demand for the community-hunting trips they organised on bright days when they were free of their farm labour. These hunting forays provided the villages with a measure of pleasure and recreation in addition to the meat they got; the flesh of all animals felled on such a trip was equally shared. There was a well established traditional code for this formality, almost a

ritual with much humour and gay banter, promoting a healthy sense of camaraderie among the villagers. In any case, life in these villages ran on an even keel with hardly any squabbles, disputes or anti-social activity that one sees so much in the urban social milieu. The whole basis for this is the fact that in their lives there was co-operation, not competition. Labour was shared each assisting the other and there was no money involved. Let an illness or death occur, the whole village was concerned and till formalities were over, their service were available free of charge. There was no competition as found among Joneses of the towns, with whom it is forever, ceaseless warfare to rake in shekels to acquire the 'goodies'.

To round off this narrative about true village life, a brief reference must be made to the beliefs, rituals and formalities that form an important aspect of their lives. Religious practices were there truest but their beliefs in gods and demons were no less and propitiating the gods and placating the demons formed an important part of this folk culture. It is only when these fail that they think of medical attention and seek the services of the village 'Vedamahattaya' and only when he, too, fails they take the patient to hospital and by that time, it may be too late. There is good reason for their great reluctance to take a patient to hospital straightaway. The absence of proper roads and easy conveyances, particularly, wheeled transport was a strong deterrent. When they were compelled to take a patient to hospital, they had to carry him on their shoulders in an improvised hammock and this sort of transport may even expedite a patient's demise on the way!

As said earlier, roads being non-existent to many of these villages, it is the footpaths unmaintained and often fading that provides even a mere semblance of a means of travel. These paths and 'bridle-tracks' are supposed to be maintained and cleared annually and this duty was entrusted to an authority at the time called the DRC (District Road Committee), but the contractors who do the work never do a good job and the paths went back to the Jungle; they invariably remain derelict lonely and haunted by the wild denizens of the forest. To a town dweller assailed as he is by numerous inconveniences the enervating urban life itself, the breathless hurry and activity, the unremitting noise, smells, dust, traffic both human and vehicular etc., etc., an escape even occasionally to the relatively quiet and leisurely rural scene would certainly be a life-regenerating experience. Today, nearly seventy years after our former British masters left, though more roads than what they had first have been built, few, if any, had been opened to connect the remote, isolated village settlements which continued to remain until very recent times, surrounded by jungle without roads.

This article will not be complete without acquainting the reader with what any of these jungle village paths looked like or what a traveller on one of those lonely derelict foot paths or bridle-tracks felt, saw or experienced. This writer will dwell for a while on the sounds, sights and the many lingering perfumes that would accompany a lonely traveller all along his journey. Once the traveller enters it, the jungle would hold him in thrall. The thick, foliage of the overhanging branches of the massive trees standing on both sides would almost entirely hide the sun and whatever little sunlight sweeps down would cast and light a dappled patchwork of shadows on the soft sands of the winding path, thickly strewn with dead leaves. Except for the occasional sound of a bird or beast, silence would overwhelm the traveller which would not only be heard but even felt! The ceaseless screech of the cicadas forever heard, but never seen, one would know, is a part of this silence, as one takes over where the other left. Suddenly, a wind would

arise and sway the overhead branches of trees and a shower of dead leaves would come down on the traveller. The subdued roar of a river not very far, but seldom seen, could be heard and he would be wading a stream of crystal-clear water winding its way to meet the river, and on its sand strewn bank, an endless procession of little yellow butterflies in their tens of thousands would rest a while to suck the ooze on the white sands, while the traveller would continue while other thousands would continue flying. While the traveller continues his lonely trudge, left entirely to his musings, to cover the last footsore mile to reach the much longed-for and much awaited 'Shangri-La' where a warm welcome food and rest await him—his home at last!

~ www.island.lk ~ By M. B. Mathmaluwe